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SUBJECT: MECIAR SAYS HZDS WANTS BACK INTO GOVERNMENT

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Former PM Vladimir Meciar told the program conference of his Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) party on 21 April 2006 that HZDS would like to be in government after June 17, elections and is ready to align with almost any party to achieve that end. Meciar seemed to focus as much on defending HZDS, past performance in government as its future prospects. He expressed only moderate criticism of the current government and made no specific attacks against ministers or personalities. (Comment. Throughout Meciar,s mind-numbingly boring speech, poloff could hear cynical comments coming from party members seated in rows further back. There was a clear impression that many delegates perceive Meciar as a precious symbol for voters, but otherwise as a hindrance.) End comment. End Summary

SUBSTANCE

¶2. (U) Meciar repeatedly and with a straight face took credit on behalf of HZDS for setting Slovakia on the path from totalitarianism and central planning to democracy and prosperity. HZDS, he said, laid the groundwork for all of Slovakia,s successes of recent years, including its accession to NATO and the EU in 2004.

¶3. (U) Meciar denied that HZDS had run a corrupt or non-transparent government. "Our decisions and actions," he said, "were always public and open - even if our friends in the international community sometimes doubted us." Time will show, according to Meciar, that HZDS brought democratic reforms to Slovakia and participated in the international community for the benefit of peace and stability.

¶4. (U) Meciar said the EU and NATO are not competitors and Slovakia should remain a link between the US and the EU. Slovakia needs the EU to remain competitive in the world. Small states, Meciar said, cannot hope to compete with the likes of the USA, Japan, India and China. HZDS is not anti-globalization or isolationist. It is for balanced relations between NATO and Europe and between Russia and Ukraine.

¶5. (U) Meciar took a dim view of the move to an all-volunteer Army. He said that while it was a necessary step, it had been done poorly and the Army's effectiveness had been diminished. The Slovak Army is not just for fighting wars and terrorism, he said, but also for responding to accidents and disasters at home and providing civil assistance during disturbances. Meciar also criticized reforms that had led to the Army procuring fewer weapons at home, and contributing to the downward slide of the once great Slovak arms industry.

¶6. (U) HZDS has always taken a positive view of the EU and of Slovakia having a place in it. Meciar said that for HZDS further integration of Europe is necessary and the proposed European Constitutional Treaty is still alive. Expansion of the EU to include the Balkan countries and Ukraine is a

priority for HZDS, but it should be done slowly and well to avoid destabilizing the existing EU. Slovakia should keep its currency longer, and switch to the Euro only in 2012.

¶17. (U) HZDS does not want the EU to become a sovereign state. Meciar contended he is not a nationalist, but that he is proud of Slovakia. "We wanted to be at the table and now we are. But we don't want to remain the poorest country at the table." In one of his few direct criticisms of the current government, Meciar said economic growth has been put at risk by the failure to invest in education reforms. Meciar said Slovakia can not afford to risk its high rates of economic growth now, just when it is showing signs of catching up with other EU member states. A few years back, according to Meciar, Slovakia had both the cheapest and the best-educated workforce in the OECD. Now, because of rapid growth, it no longer has the cheapest and because of a lack of investment in education it has the least educated young workers.

¶18. (U) Meciar said Slovakia has lost the title "Tatra Tiger" and should from now on be known as the "Tatra Tomcat" instead. The Tiger image was anyway not deserved, since the government was able to create it only by frittering away the resources left by the last HZDS regime, which Meciar claimed had left billions and billions of crowns in the state accounts. Meciar also accused the current government of privatizing the corporate economic underpinnings of the state and using the one-time profit to create an illusion of prosperity. HZDS is open to foreign investment, but a government must take care of its own interests first. Meciar would like Slovakia to produce weapons again.

¶19. (U) HZDS's priority in the next government will be to develop human capital. Meciar said this would be done not only by providing resources to Slovaks, but also by

BRATISLAVA 00000357 002 OF 002

encouraging skilled immigrants to come to Slovakia. Roma education is critical. Meciar supported the idea of educating youth from irresponsible homes in boarding schools.

¶10. (U) Health is a civil right. There is no way back to the old system where a basic problem was that the system was producing losses. But reform in the health sector cannot be based only on market principles - Slovakia is on the edge of social unrest and it is necessary to do something.

¶11. (U) Meciar indicated that HZDS would support Constitutional changes including:
- Eliminate the 50% clause from the law on referendum, so that referendum results will be valid with any turnout;
- Establish more public control of NGOs;
- MPs lose their seats if they leave the party for which they were elected;
- Change the election system from proportional to majoritarian with one mandate for each election district.

STYLE AND HUMOR

¶12. (U) Meciar arrived 45 minutes after the scheduled start of the conference and made his way slowly to the stage, stopping along the way to shake hands.

¶13. (U) When Meciar spoke of encouraging skilled immigrants, he claimed that on a recent trip to Turkey a businessman there told him "Turkey is already in the EU, we have 1 million people in Germany."

¶16. (SBU) Meciar said that an American businessman had recently told him that in America 1 out of 10 women are beautiful, while in Slovakia 1 out of 10 are ugly (Comment: the daily newspaper SME noted that representatives of the Embassy had been present and wondered if this joke had been translated. The poloff attending the conference had already heard the same line, and also the one allegedly told to Meciar by a Turkish businessman, several times in the past.

End comment.)

¶18. (SBU) Comment. Throughout Meciar,s mind-numbingly boring speech, poloff could hear cynical comments coming from party members seated in rows further back. There was a clear impression that many delegates perceive Meciar as a precious symbol for voters, but otherwise as a hindrance. End comment.
VALLEE